
Ontology

Dale Jacquette



Central
Problems of
Philosophy
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Ontology

Central Problems of Philosophy

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For Tina

an existent entity if ever there was one

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There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others deals generally with being as being.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 1003a20–25

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Preface

This book investigates and proposes a theory to solve the most fundamental problems of being. I know how that sounds. But trying to understand the meaning, the undeniable but non-self-explanatory fact and nature of existence, is indispensable to philosophy. Accordingly, we must not shrink from the task, whatever difficulties are entailed.

I distinguish between *pure philosophical* and *applied scientific ontology*. Pure philosophical ontology deals with such questions as what is meant by the concept of being, why there exists something rather than nothing, and why there exists exactly one logically contingent actual world. Applied scientific ontology advances a preferred existence domain consisting of three categories of existent entities, including existent (we can also say actual) objects, existent states of affairs, and the actual world. The actual world is itself an entity, one that contains all other entities; it contains all and only actual states of affairs, involving all and only existent objects. The entities included in a theoretical ontology are those minimally required for an adequate philosophical semantics, the things to which we must be able to refer in order to make sense of meaningful thought and discourse, especially in the sciences. These are the objects that we say exist, to which we are ontologically committed.

The problems of pure philosophical ontology have seemed so deep or confused that philosophers who concentrate primarily on the concept of being as such have acquired an occasionally deserved reputation for obscurity and even incoherence. On the other hand, philosophers who turn away from the problems of pure philosophical ontology as beyond reach, focusing exclusively on what appear superficially to be technically more manageable problems of applied ontology in the special disciplines, face a serious but usually unacknowledged methodological difficulty. For it is only by answering the questions of

pure philosophical ontology that we can come to understand the nature of being, what it means for something to exist, without which applied scientific ontology lacks a sound theoretical foundation.

If we do not know what it means for something to exist, how can we intelligently argue that quarks and electrons exist but Euclidean points or universals do not exist? In lieu of an adequate applied scientific ontology, metaphysics defaults on its responsibility to explain all of existence, to justify a choice of what things and kinds of things exist. Without a satisfactory pure philosophical ontology to answer the question of being, to explain what it means for something to exist, applied scientific ontology cannot competently identify existent objects, or decide which putative entities actually exist and which do not exist, which should be included in and which should be excluded from a preferred existence domain.

Philosophers who confine their work to applied scientific ontology sometimes argue that it is pointless to investigate the supposedly profound but ultimately incomprehensible questions of pure philosophical ontology. They maintain it is enough to know from immediate experience that there exists something rather than nothing. They are often prepared from this empirical starting place to proceed immediately to arguments for or against the inclusion of this or that particular entity or category of entities in the existence domain. They may then delve without further ado into considering the best reasons for admitting numbers but not sets, or sets but not numbers, particulars versus universals and instances, parts and wholes, and the like, into the existence domain. Others may try again without preliminary philosophical analysis to dismiss the problems of pure philosophical ontology as altogether meaningless according to a favored criterion, methodology or ideology; or, they may enter the fray polemically at a higher level of abstraction, casting scorn on the pretensions of speculative metaphysics in an age of modern science. How can we waste our time, they wonder, asking what it means to be and why there exists something rather than nothing?

I think, on the contrary, that we are stuck with ontology's toughest questions. Mathematics and science enjoy the luxury of advancing systematically by taking the metaphysics of their respective existence domains for granted. Philosophy, by contrast, as a study in part of the deepest presuppositions of truth, cannot avoid the challenge of understanding the nature of existence. I am unimpressed with efforts to set aside the problems of ontology as unintelligible or otherwise outside our grasp. I am persuaded that we cannot build much of interest in philosophy unless we have first thought through the fundamental

problems of being. Finally, I am optimistic about the possibility of shedding light on the first principles of ontology, because the answers I find most attractive dovetail perfectly with the assumptions of classical logic.

My thesis is that the problems of pure philosophical ontology can be satisfactorily answered from the implicit conceptual resources of elementary logic. The questions that have baffled ontologists in trying to explain the nature of being are inextricably intertwined with the requirements of standard formal symbolic logic. All we have to do is look closely at what logic expresses in order to see why there must exist something rather than nothing, and why there is only one logically contingent actual world. When we have done so, we will have explained what it means for something to exist, and thereby demystified the metaphysics of being. Logic, furthermore, provides the only possible answers to the fundamental problems of pure philosophical ontology. The concept of being is so basic to all our thinking that there is nowhere else to turn for explanation. The principles of pure philosophical ontology are indistinguishable in this sense from the conceptual foundations of logic. The situation could not be otherwise. If logic were unable to answer the fundamental problems of pure philosophical ontology, if these difficult questions were not already answered by logic, then they could not be answered at all, and there could be no hope for pure philosophical or applied scientific ontology. As we shall see, logic does not let ontology down.

Pure philosophical ontology, indispensable as groundwork, is only the first major step toward a complete fully integrated ontology. When we know what it means for something to exist, we can then proceed to the details of applied scientific ontology, defending the choice of a particular domain of existent entities. It is in this branch of ontology that we explain the concepts and clarify the existence conditions of physical entities and declare ourselves in favour of or opposed to the existence of numbers, sets, universals, relations, propositions, and abstract objects generally, minds and persons, God as a divine supernatural mind, language, art and other cultural artefacts. The traditional controversies of descriptive and speculative metaphysics are located here, where the stakes are higher than in pure philosophical ontology, in arguments for the existence or nonexistence of specific contested entities.

The two components, pure philosophical and applied scientific ontology, complement one another. No metaphysics of being can claim to be complete if it does not keep each separate and in its proper place while providing satisfactory answers to both specialized sets of problems. It is as much a mistake to investigate only the more

tractable problems of applied scientific ontology, say, of whether or not numbers or universals exist, while giving up on pure philosophical ontology, as it would be to devote attention exclusively to the fundamental problems of pure philosophical ontology to the neglect of making substantive commitments to the existence of real entities in applied scientific ontology. We should not try to establish a domain of existent entities that is not guided by a prior clarification of the concept of being; but having addressed the problems of pure philosophical ontology, we must then move on to fill in the details of a preferred existence domain as a contribution to applied scientific ontology.

Dale Jacquette
23 March 2001
Essaouira, Morocco

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Introduction: Being as such

A metaphysical question

The concept of being is so fundamental to philosophy that we usually take the idea of existence for granted rather than try to analyse its meaning. Philosophical confusions nevertheless lie in wait for thinkers in any branch of philosophy who have not first clarified what it means for something to exist. When the dust settles in these most basic of reflections in pure philosophical ontology, it appears that the definition of existence is transparently simple, although its implications are easily misinterpreted.

What exists? This is what we really want to know: whether and in what sense spatiotemporal physical entities, numbers and sets, propositions and universals, persons and minds and God, among other things, are real. Before we can address questions of what specific things or kinds of things exist, we need to understand the concept of existence, of being as such, or what Aristotle in the motto from *Metaphysics* Γ quoted in the epigraph refers to as being *qua* being or being *as* being, $\text{ov } \eta \text{ ov}$. What is it, what does it mean, to *be*? This is the ultimate question for pure philosophical ontology. We cannot meaningfully assert the existence or nonexistence of physical entities, of numbers, sets, universals or anything else, unless or until we comprehend what it means for something to exist in the most general sense. The fact that the actual world exists is not generally in doubt, and perhaps cannot sanely be questioned. The mere presumptive fact of the world's existence nevertheless offers no philosophical insight as we try to fathom what it *means* for the world to exist as a problem in pure philosophical ontology, and try on the basis of a good analysis of the concept of being to rigorously justify belief in the existence of the world.

The question of being asks what it means for something to exist. Alternatively, but equivalently, it enquires into the precise meaning of

the words “being”, “to be”, “exist”, “existence”, to be “real”, “actual”, “present”, “manifest”, and like cognates. It is tempting in light of the hazards of defining a concept as fundamental as being to try to explain what it means for something to exist by spooning up synonyms. To *exist* is then to *be*, to be *real*, *actual* or *present*. The trouble is that all these expressions and others that might be introduced equally stand in need of explanation, and by themselves only add to the stock of concepts that require clarification. Nor is it particularly helpful to plunge in and begin drawing distinctions between different kinds or categories of being, as though we already know perfectly well what it means for something to exist and are prepared to start carving up the field. We cannot hope to explain the concept of being by pointing triumphantly to any given choice or subdivision of types of existent things. We remain equally in the dark in that case as to what it means for any of these things to have being.

If we want to know what it means for something to be, we must try to understand the concept in more familiar terms. We might appeal to even simpler properties, if there are any; or we might be driven in desperation to clarify the meaning of being by resorting to metaphor and analogy. The history of ontology offers a useful methodological inroad to the meaning of being. The connection between these questions is not immediately obvious, and has not always been appreciated. An analysis of being, of what it means for something to exist, can be discerned in efforts to answer the problem of why there exists something rather than nothing, and of whether, and if so why, there exists only one logically contingent actual world. Conceptual analysis rarely succeeds in a vacuum, and we must take our insights where we can, often by addressing the practical applied problems in which the concepts are found working at their day jobs. The analysis of a concept as it relates to the solution of the conceptual difficulties from which it emerges and to which it contributes, when things go well, all fit together in a satisfying way. By tackling the above problems we approach the concept of being indirectly. We discover the only theory of being that makes headway with these long-standing metaphysical puzzles in the only place where it could possibly be found – in logic, the only philosophical study more basic than ontology.

Pure and applied ontology, as discipline or domain

The word “ontology” has four established meanings in philosophy. There are two intersecting sets of distinctions. Pure philosophical ontology is different from applied scientific ontology, and ontology in

the applied scientific sense can be understood either as a *discipline* or a *domain*.

Ontology as discipline is a method or activity of enquiry into philosophical problems about the concept or facts of existence. Ontology as a domain is the outcome or subject matter of ontology as a discipline. Applied scientific ontology construed as an existence domain can be further subdivided as the theoretical commitment to a preferred choice of existent entities, or to the real existent entities themselves, including the actual world considered as a whole, also known as the *extant* domain. Ontology as a *theoretical* domain is thus a description or inventory of the things that are supposed to exist according to a particular theory, which might but need not be true. Ontology as the extant domain, in contrast, is the actual world of all real existent entities, whatever these turn out to be, identified by a true complete applied ontological theory. As a result, we must be careful in reading philosophical works on ontology, when an author speaks of “ontology” without qualification, not to confuse the intended sense of the word with any of the alternatives. The distinctions are collected in Figure 1.

The distinction between ontology as discipline and domain cuts unevenly across the distinction between pure philosophical and applied scientific ontology. Pure philosophical ontology is concerned with the

Type	Use					
	As discipline	As domain				
Pure philosophical ontology (Prior foundational study)	Most general branch of metaphysics (1)	No ontological commitment – cannot be interpreted as preferred existence domain				
Applied scientific ontology (Secondary ontological superstructure)	Metaphysics of specific fields of thought and discourse (2)	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th><i>Theoretical</i></th> <th><i>Extant</i></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Ontological commitment to preferred existence domain (3)</td> <td>Actual world of all real or existent entities described by a complete true theoretical ontology (4)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<i>Theoretical</i>	<i>Extant</i>	Ontological commitment to preferred existence domain (3)	Actual world of all real or existent entities described by a complete true theoretical ontology (4)
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Ontological commitment to preferred existence domain (3)	Actual world of all real or existent entities described by a complete true theoretical ontology (4)					

Figure 1 Four meanings of “ontology”

meaning of the concept of being, with the question why there is something rather than nothing, and the modal ontological status of the actual world. Applied scientific ontology builds on the conceptual analysis of what it means for something to exist in order to recommend a preferred existence domain, thereby committing itself to the existence of a particular choice of entities. Applied ontology, as discipline or domain, is scientific in that it applies the definition of being to determine the ontological commitments of other disciplines, notably but not exclusively in the natural sciences, in much the same way that applied mathematics in engineering is related to pure mathematics.

A major source of confusion in ontology results from the failure to distinguish questions and answers that are appropriate to pure philosophical as opposed to applied scientific ontology, and between the questions and answers that are proper to ontology in the sense of a discipline versus those pertaining to ontology in the sense of a theoretical or extant existence domain. An illustration of such cross-categorical mayhem can be anticipated for the thesis developed in the first part of the book: that ontology is “reducible” to logic. This is a breezy but not necessarily inaccurate way of describing a particular answer to the question of what it means for something to exist. The obvious criticism to raise at the first whisper of a reduction of ontology to logic is that logic is a system of purely formal relations, and that from pure logical form we can never validly derive the real existence of any contingently existent entity.

The objection has a point, but not the one it is usually thought to have. It would, admittedly, be hopeless, even meaningless, to try to derive an applied scientific ontology in the sense of a preferred existence domain from logic alone. Theoretically, but even more certainly in the sense of an extant domain consisting of existent entities themselves, we cannot squeeze ontology out of pure logic in the sense of validly deducing the contents of a preferred theoretical existence domain. The logical principle, “If p , then p ” neither proves that there are camels, nor that there are not. The present thesis, fortunately, is not that we can derive the existence of any particular entity or specific kind of entity from logic in applied scientific ontology, but that pure logic suitably interpreted provides correct answers to such problems of pure philosophical ontology as why there exists something rather than nothing and why there exists exactly one logically contingent actual world. In the process, logical analysis in pure philosophical ontology implicitly explains what it means for something to exist.

Pure ontology does not promote and cannot be associated with any preferred existence domain. It is indifferent to whether or not there

are physical objects, or whether or not there are numbers and sets, or numbers but no sets, or sets but no numbers, or universals, or propositions, or minds, or God. The questions of pure philosophical ontology, ultimately about the meaning of the concept of being, are much more rudimentary.

Applied scientific ontology, in contrast, can be understood both as discipline and domain. As a discipline, applied scientific ontology is a method of enquiry dedicated to identifying a system of categories for a preferred domain of existent entities. As a domain, applied scientific ontology is divided in its responsibilities to identify the ontology of specific areas of thought and discourse whose meaning requires the positing of a particular choice of entities. The ontology of Aristotle's science, in contrast with Darwin's or Einstein's, gives a sense of the possibilities. Each of these theories has a theoretical ontology, in which the putative entities to which it is ontologically committed are listed or described. The ontology in the sense of a scientific theory's existence domain must be adequate for its individual purposes and capable of being integrated with the ontologies of other true theories in other fields and disciplines. None of these need be *the* ontology in big letters that correctly explains the way things really are, in the second, stronger sense of the term existence "domain". The one and only correct ontology in this sense is the extant realm of actually existent entities – all, and only, the actually existent objects and states of affairs that constitute the actual world.

Applied scientific ontology is supposed to recommend a unified ontology, a preferred existence domain of entities for all true thought and expression. Applied ontology is tasked with explicating a system of categories of existent entities. Some applied ontologies strive for uniformity throughout a single domain by adhering to a higher metaphysical principle, letting the chips fall where they may with respect to the existence or nonexistence of abstract entities, minds, persons or God. They may try to do so, for example, by insisting that only individuals exist, or only those entities that are absolutely required in order to make sense of mathematics or science or religion exist, or the like, often disagreeing along the way about what should count as mathematics or science or religion, what counts as, or is absolutely needed for, a correct explanation of their respective subject matters. Other applied ontologies with equal legitimacy piece together their conclusions about what kinds of things must exist from the best available arguments in each area of application, often trying to preserve consistency in the resulting package, and sometimes deriving metaphysical morals as they emerge in a synthesis of otherwise

independent domains. As a rule, the more interesting an applied ontology, the more interesting the principle by which its ontological commitments are justified. A preferred existence domain is usually upheld by or lends distinct intuitive appeal to a general metaphysical principle in support of the existence or nonexistence of particular disputed entities.

Applied ontology has little choice in accommodating motley existence requirements. It is the nature of applied ontology in both the discipline and domain sense to be precisely as fragmented as all the distinctive types of discourse for whose meaning it provides a domain. In the end, there may be no unifying overarching principle by which physical objects, sets and numbers exist, qualities but not relations exist, minds and persons exist, but God does or alternatively does not exist, if that should turn out to be the preferred existence domain endorsed by an applied ontology. The separate results of arguments for and against the inclusion of any of these entities or kinds of entities in the preferred existence domain recommended by applied scientific ontology as a discipline must then be gathered together as putative entities, and, to whatever extent possible, reconciled to one another's presence in the domain.

Similar problems plague applied ontology in choosing between incompatible existence claims. If a particular science disagrees with a particular religion about the existence of God, the origin of the universe, or the evolution of species, for example, then that particular science and that particular religion are committed to significantly different applied ontologies in the sense that each accepts a different preferred existence domain. Their differences, whether or not the scientists or religious followers in question are aware of it, will then come down to disputes about applied ontology in the domain sense. If they do not happen also to be ontologists, they will not ordinarily disagree about applied ontology as a discipline. The interesting problem, whether the theoretical applied ontology of religion is correct as against that of science, or the opposite, can only be answered if we know which if either side is committed in its preferred theoretical existence domain to the extant domain of real existent entities. This is precious knowledge; but many thinkers involved in ontic conflicts have not hesitated to offer opinions.

To resolve an ontological dispute, religion and science must either come to share a single preferred existence domain that includes or excludes the existence of God, or their disagreements must be brought to applied ontology as discipline for arbitration. Their differences need not be fixed in stone. Scientists and religious followers can

modify the ontological situation significantly if they move toward a universal God-less religion (of which there are numerous models, Zen and Taoism, among others) or if they adopt a universal God-ly science (of which historically there are many more models, especially prior to the nineteenth century). Unless or until that point is reached, the respective theoretical existence domains of science and religion remain at least somewhat apart. Applied ontology, if it is to have any role in the dispute, must ascend to a higher plane from which vantage point it can identify each disputant's commitments to distinct theoretical existence domains. The domains of ontically conflicting theories must remain at least partially outside one another, even if in other ways they overlap. They can only be unified, collapsed into one or completely absorbed one into the other, if the theories themselves eventually coalesce, or if applied ontology as a discipline concludes that one is right and the other wrong, in the course of articulating its own preferred existence domain, thereby eliminating all rival theoretical ontologies. Applied ontology as discipline and domain can affect to resolve ground-level disagreements between theists and atheists by superimposing its own preferred existence domain, potentially as a pox on both their houses, in which God or the Big Bang or natural selection either exists or does not, as correctly describing the actual world.

Nor need philosophical interaction end there. It remains open indefinitely to other ontologists to challenge previous findings and launch an opposing applied ontology that might reflect very different conclusions, favouring the other or neither side of the dispute. When this happens, conflicting applied ontologies must minimally disagree in the sense that each by hypothesis offers a different preferred existence domain. Interestingly, applied ontologies can also disagree in the discipline sense, if their conclusions issue, as they are likely to do, from a sufficiently divergent methodological conception of what it means for something to exist, the criteria of ontological commitment, or the standards of comparative preferability for competing existence domains. The refinement of applied ontology as a discipline is often motivated by precisely this adversarial dynamic between opposed applied ontologies positing incompatible preferred existence domains. It is a worthwhile endeavour in such circumstances to explore the possibilities of obtaining leverage at a methodological plane for resolving incompatible existence claims. What passes for applied ontology as discipline or domain in such cases is often quite legitimately a partisan effort to resolve lower-level ontological conflicts in the service of philosophical enquiry.

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